

Into the Literature: Creating Context

Adventures of Huckleberry Finn

First imagined as a companion to Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, *Huckleberry Finn* took seven years to write. Twain began it in 1876, wrote about a quarter of it that summer, and then put it aside. He picked up the manuscript again when the mood hit him, years later. Twain had learned that "When the tank runs dry you've only to leave it alone and it will fill up again, in time, when you are asleep—also while you are at work at other things, and are quite unaware that this unconscious and profitable cerebration is going on." In the summer of 1883, though, the well was full, and he was "piling up manuscript in a really astonishing way"—writing pages and then letting them fall to the floor.

Excerpts from the book were first serialized in *Century* magazine in 1884 and 1885. The editor, Richard Watson Gilder, deleted references to nakedness, offensive smells, and nose-blowing. "At times," the cautious editor explained, Clemens was "inartistically and indefensibly coarse."

Attitudes and Language

Huckleberry Finn is known as the first work of fiction to use the American vernacular, or regional, conversational speech. Twain's mastery of dialects and idioms set a literary precedent—and also caused a great deal of controversy, which continues today. For example, many readers consider it a negative racial stereotype to have Jim speak in a rough, uneducated way, even though it is true that slaves were not educated at the time. Furthermore, the frequent use of the n-word reflects speech patterns of the time, whether it was offensive then (as it was, at times), it is offensive now. Twain's inclusion of the term in the speech of his characters captures their varying degrees of racial prejudice. For example, Pap uses it in its most abusive sense; Huck uses it indifferently, as if not completely conscious of its derogatory nature. Jim also uses the word matter-of-factly to refer to himself and other African-Americans. Twain does not condone his characters' often racist attitudes.

Banning the Book

Almost from the time it was published, *Huckleberry Finn* stirred controversy. Some objected to what they saw as the glorification of Huck's stealing, smoking, and general disdain of society. They felt that Twain was making a hero of an outcast who would defy all rules of proper behavior.

His portrayal of both whites and African Americans has also been denounced: the white characters for being mainly hypocritical, violent bigots, the African-American characters for being inarticulate and devoted to their white oppressors. Even now, the book is banned from numerous school and public libraries.

Standards Focus: Subgenres of Literature—Satire (Chapters 1-3)

Many students are familiar with the different genres, or categories of literature—fiction, nonfiction, poetry, drama—to name a few. However, there are often many subgenres of literature within these genres. For example, under the broad genre of plays, there are the subgenres of comedy, tragedy and history. Under the genre of mystery, there are the subgenres of thriller, detective, historical, romantic, and suspense.

Adventures of Huckleberry Finn falls under the genre of fiction, and the subgenre of satire. Satire is a piece of work that tries to expose, attack and/or ridicule the foolishness, wrongdoings, or strange behavior of society. Satire are often humorous, using exaggeration, irony, sarcasm, and parody to catch the attention of the reader and promote changes in behavior. Modern satire can be seen on television shows such as *Saturday Night Live*, *The Simpsons*, or in political cartoons in newspapers or magazines.

Huck Finn is a satire of the American South in the 19th Century. While slavery had been abolished by the time Twain wrote *Huck Finn*, racism and prejudice were still a major issue. While Twain's main target is slavery, he also explores and criticizes civility, conformity, religion, hypocrisy, and the idea of superstition.

1. "Pretty soon I wanted to smoke, and asked the widow to let me. But she wouldn't. She said it was a mean practice and it wasn't clean and I must try not to do it anymore. That is just the way with some people. They get down on a thing when they don't know nothing about it...And she took snuff, too; of course that was all right because she done it herself."

Twain is satirizing: _____

2. “Pretty soon a spider went crawling up my shoulder, and I flipped it off and it lit in the candle; and before I could budge it was all shriveled up. I didn't need anybody to tell me that that was an awful bad sign and would fetch me some bad luck, so I was scared and most shook the clothes off of me. I got up and turned around in my tracks three times and crossed my breast every time; and then I tied up a little lock of my hair with a thread to keep witches away. But I hadn't no confidence. You do that when you've lost a horseshoe that you've found, instead of nailing it up over the door, but I hadn't ever heard anybody say it was any way to keep off bad luck when you'd killed a spider.”

Twain is satirizing: _____

Standards Focus: The Language in *Huckleberry Finn* (Chapters 4-7)

Ever heard of *gnarly*, *radical*, *awesome*, *tubular*, *gag me with a spoon*, *moded* or *grody* to the max? These are expressions of slang, fleeting expressions of pop culture that began in California's San Fernando Valley, but eventually moved into mainstream language in the 1980s. Dialect is the distinctive speech pattern of a particular region, class or race. Unlike slang, dialect has distinct system of grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation, and has usually been in existence for a long time.

Huck Finn, Jim, Tom, and Pap all have their own slang, within some form of a Southern dialect. For example, Huck “don't take no stock in mathematics,” meaning, he doesn't think mat is important or necessary. By using dialect and slang, Twain gives his characters a believable personality and contributes to the realism of the setting.

Directions: Below are sentences containing words used by the characters in *Huck Finn*. Using context clues, rewrite each underlined word or phrase using a more updated or everyday expression that has the same meaning.

1. Huck says that when he got uncommon tired he would play hookey.

2. Judge Thatcher couldn't seem to make it out that Huck didn't want his money.

3. Pap says, “You've put on considerable many frills since I been away. I'll take you down a peg before I get done with you.”

4. Pap says, “Looky here—mind you talk to me; I'm a-standing about all I can stand now—so don't gimme no sass.”

5. Pap went to Judge Thatcher's house and bullyragged him for money.

6. Every time Pap got drunk he would raise Cain around town.

7. “By and by Pap got too handy with his hick'ry, and I couldn't stand it.”

8. “While we laid off after breakfast to sleep up, both of us begin work out, I got to thinking...”

9. “Another time a man comes a-prowling round here, you roust me out, you hear?”

10. “I took a good gap and a stretch, and was just going to unhitch when I hear a sound away over the water.”

11. “It was kind of lazy and jolly, laying off comfortable all day, smoking and fishing, and no books to study.”

12. “Pap warn't in a good humor—so he was his natural self.”
